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Museums, participatory arts activities and wellbeing

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Abstract

This paper explores how conventional teaching and learning strategies can be employed in museum arts activities, and outlines the relationship between museum learning and its impact on individual and community wellbeing. The topic is discussed in relation to key philosophical and pedagogical practices within teaching and learning in the museum sector. Within the paper, the term museum is used to refer to those sites that may also be referred to as galleries or heritage sites.

Specific examples of practice are presented to illustrate how museum participatory arts activities can enhance wellbeing. These demonstrate how educators within this context can consciously integrate strategies into their planning and teaching to support learners' wellbeing in a purposeful manner. Throughout the paper analysis is concerned with the impact of participation on learners and how future experiences can be enhanced, therefore improving practice.

Key words

Museums; Participation; Arts Activities; Wellbeing; Non-formal Learning; Community Learning.

Introduction

The profile of learners I teach within the museums sector is wide, ranging from secondary school pupils and Higher Education students to adult and young people's groups within the community. These include students with special educational needs, English speakers of other languages, clients of day centres, young carers and ex-offenders at risk of social exclusion. Activities range from one-off arts workshops and short courses to fixed-term participatory projects.

As a practitioner I am conscious of the inseparable relationship between the context of my teaching and learners' wellbeing. This paper attempts to define what we mean by wellbeing and critically analyses how teaching within my context can enhance wellbeing. The implications of relevant philosophical and pedagogical practices within teaching and learning in my context, specific to wellbeing, are reviewed. This paper considers strategies I can methodically integrate into my museum teaching to support wellbeing purposefully, using arts and creativity as a vehicle, to a wide cross-section of formal and non-formal learners which is characteristic of my practice.

Throughout the paper specific examples are presented to illustrate how museum participatory arts activities can enhance wellbeing. These examples are based on the experiences and outcomes of one organisation's programme and cannot be anticipated to provide a universal overview for work of this nature. The examples identified from this organisation will resonate elsewhere, but the qualitative nature of the work and the nature of wellbeing prevent quantifiable comparisons from being drawn.

Context

Wellbeing is a term with no definitive academic definition: it is not measurable against quantifiable criteria and is largely subjective. There is however, a consensus of wellbeing

defined in terms of access to positive life experiences, both within the Lifelong Learning Sector and society as a whole. Access and equality are essential in order to facilitate sustained feelings of happiness and purpose for individuals and communities.

The National Accounts of Wellbeing, founded in 1986, are an independent 'think-and-do tank' (National Accounts of Wellbeing, 2011: online). They aim to improve the quality of life and develop greater understanding and strategies for change. In 2011, they stated that '*wellbeing is most usefully thought of as the dynamic process that gives people a sense of how their lives are going, through the interaction between their circumstances, activities and psychological resources*' (National Accounts of Wellbeing, 2011: online). This corresponds with the government's discussion paper issued in October 2011, *Measuring National Wellbeing*, on the domains and measurements of wellbeing, which states that factors influencing wellbeing include relationships, health, what we do, where we live, and education and skills (Beaumont, 2011). The above discussion paper, David Cameron's statement that '*it's time we focused not just on GDP – gross domestic product – but on GWB – general wellbeing*' (Guardian, 2010) and the development of the *Five Ways To Wellbeing* by the New Economics Foundation (connecting, being active, taking notice, keeping learning and giving – that if practised regularly can improve personal wellbeing [nef, 2011]) reflects how wellbeing is at the centre of current agendas.

Since the first version of this paper, the government issued draft measures – in July 2012 – in response to their discussion paper as part of the Office of National Statistics' Measuring National Wellbeing Programme. As the government's draft proposals and responses to them illustrate, ascertaining agreeable methods of measurement is an ongoing and controversial topic. Initial proposals made no reference to arts, culture or heritage, with other areas such as Lifelong Learning and sport also omitted. The summary of draft proposals refers only to factors such as health, relationships, job satisfaction, economic security and education-environment conditions as specified measurement indicators. Despite this, the most recent *Taking Part Survey* data, at the time of writing (a rolling survey into cultural participation in England and also compiled by the Office of National Statistics [Kendall, 2012]), on the impact of engagement with museums on wellbeing, showed that those who had engaged with heritage in the past 12 months reported higher happiness scores (8.0 out of 10) compared with those who had not (7.6 out of 10) (Kendall, 2012). With the above in mind however, this paper is not to focus on measurement indicators and results for wellbeing, as it remains a controversial topic with continuing uncertainties as to what are agreed national indicators.

The contemporary definition of wellbeing is related to the philosophy of democracy in education as examined by John Dewey in his book *Education and Democracy* (1916). Dewey claimed that education fosters a nurturing process which gives attention to growth. Learners should participate in activities for them to appreciate their value, bringing to the fore issues of equality and equity. This philosophy of social justice can be defined as the generic term covering the ethical framework concerned with equity and equality (Chapman and West-Burnham, 2009); that every individual has the right to access and benefit from services in relation to fairness and need. This reconnects to the definition of wellbeing involving access and equality which is espoused by museums through their intrinsic, and targeted, social inclusion work and provision of self-paced and directed activities. Such activities include participative, exploratory and activity-based encounters characterised by social interaction, all of which characterise the creative nature of museum learning (Matthewson-Mitchell, 2008). These characteristics of museum learning are also representative of the nature of teaching creative subjects – the learner, their participation and exploration are at the centre of teaching and learning.

The Group for Large Local Authority Museums (GLLAM) Report (2000) detailed the role which museums play in contributing to inclusion agendas. To be socially inclusive is to engage with those at risk of social disadvantage or marginalisation and to inspire and challenge (GLLAM, 2000). This is not to say that museums are to engage with 'hard to reach' groups alone, but to be establishments for all regardless of age, ethnicity or economic standing:

'[Museums] play a role in generating social change by engaging with and empowering people to determine their place in the world, educating themselves to achieve their own potential, play a full part in society and contribute to reforming it in the future'.

(Department for Culture, Media and Sport, 2000 cited in GLLAM, 2000: p. 23)

Whilst an intrinsic role within museums, this is also amplified by the work of outreach and community officers; those whose roles are primarily concerned with increasing access and removing barriers to the museum services, be they physical, intellectual, financial or attitudinal.

Museums are well placed to support social inclusion and wellbeing outcomes due to their unique multi-sensory appeal that fosters differentiation and environments that facilitate reduced anxiety levels (Binnie, 2010). The following statement from a project officer for an ex-offenders group to me demonstrates a reduction in anxiety for some of my museum learners:

'X has said today that she had "not felt so relaxed in a long time" and was really enthused about learning more about stained glass whilst she was making it. All the other women felt comfortable and relaxed which is so important'.

As the above statement highlights, there are clear relationships between how museums support learning and wellbeing and how learning itself supports wellbeing. Learning as a central purpose of museums has historically long been recognised. Museums, as we recognise them today, came into being during the 1900s with the development of the nation-state, *'in response to the recognition that the welfare of citizens was the responsibility of the government. Public museums grew as knowledge spread beyond a very limited class'* (Hein, 1998: p.3). This continues to be reflected in accepted contemporary definitions of what a museum is:

'A museum is a non-profit, permanent institution in the service of society and its development, open to the public, which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits the tangible and intangible heritage of humanity and its environment for the purposes of education, study and enjoyment'.

(International Council of Museums, 2007)

Increasingly there is a greater degree of awareness of the value of cultural involvement, of which museums are a part, to learners' personal and social development (Bacon, 2009). Museum learning presents hands-on learning from experience opportunities. It offers an environment of exploration, discovery and social development through the relationship with a public space and other visitors.

Evidence for the belief in the influence of education and learning on wellbeing is itself reflected in the almost universal commitment to the 2005-2014 UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (Michalos, 2008). Governments committed to the goals of integrating sustainable development into all areas of education and learning, resulting in

changes in behaviour that should lead to future environmental, economic and societal integrity and viability in a just society.

In Practice

The nature of the arts as a means of participation within museums enhances social inclusion as *'creative activities bring people together, encourage cooperation and reminds us what it is to be human'* (Devlin, 2011: p. 46). It does this by engaging people in collaboration, fostering shared and individual experiences and emotions in a context which links people to those within their communities, past and present. Engaging in this process through creative media reinforces the notion that the individual is able to make a mark on the world around them.

Museums are keepers of collective memories and experiences and are well placed to facilitate connections and interventions between individuals and the museum or their communities – the arts are an effective means through which this can be enabled due to their potential for exploration and personalisation. In doing so, museums are not only facilitating social interaction, which is key to fostering wellbeing, but also valuing and validating what people say by fostering a sense of self-worth and empowerment. To give a specific example, the 'A Curious Old House' project set out to explore our museum's significance to those whose lives have been touched by it and contributed to its survival. Through a large-scale photography project, former residents, workers and visitors contributed portraits and stories to the venture. 'A Curious Old House' utilised photography as a tool to portray changing lives and landscapes through environmental portraits. The effects of this were to raise the profile of the museum to those who may have previously been unfamiliar with it, whilst generating an archive about what it means to the identity of local residents and the evolving community. Quotes were captured from participants, gathering their thoughts about what the museum meant to them. These were included in an end of project public exhibition and accompanying book; a personal and collective experience shared with family, friends, neighbours and visitors. A dialogue also took place within the exhibition via a memory book. Visitors interacted with each other's entries that related to personal memories of visiting the museum, living, growing up or working in the local area.

The informal learning which often characterises museum activities can result in powerful effects for individuals and groups and *'bring people and communities together, challenge stereotypes and contribute to community cohesion...help build people's confidence and add to their self fulfilment'* (Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills, 2009: p. 1). Engagement with museums and their collections can facilitate participants to make connections with people and places, fostering feelings of inclusion in wider society (Health+Culture, 2012). The use of arts specifically can foster wellbeing due to the nature of activity, as it enables participants to engage in methods of self-expression, exploring ideas and emotions whilst placing experience at the heart of learning. Arts activities are a good means of engaging people in activities in the community when there may be resistance to 'learn', as art can be seen as enjoyable. Learning through creativity in this context can be seen as having multiple options and combats any notion of failure, enabling learners to feel a sense of achievement and pride.

A community yarn bomb I periodically facilitate within the museum and its grounds illustrates how participation in museum arts activities can embody the notions of connectedness and learning through fun. Yarn bombing is a form of knitted and crochet graffiti – non-permanent installations of yarn within an environment. By bringing individuals and groups together to yarn bomb elements of the museum, connections are being made

with their environment and community, whilst working towards a joint purpose. Feedback from one member of an NHS mental health support group stated that the knitting sessions had enabled them to take on a new challenge – to learn a new skill, whilst providing them with a rewarding goal for the day. Through the event, participants learn and develop the technique of knitting and also comprehend its origins and production. Feedback from learners demonstrates how this facilitates inspiration and social integration; one participant stated that the project gave her a focus and enabled her to make new relationships with her neighbours that she hadn't spoken with before. This person is now an active member of the museum's volunteer team. This project grows year on year, with a greater community buzz generated around activity, and most importantly community ownership of the theme and nature of work created. The process of teaching and learning through the arts can give learners control of that area of their life and subsequently the self-confidence to be empowered elsewhere.

Participation in museum activities, with specific reference to arts provision, has been evidenced to promote wellbeing. The question for me is how to ensure I heighten opportunities to foster wellbeing in activities without it being incidental. There are limitations on a sustained 'teaching' of wellbeing within the museum learning context due to the ephemeral nature of relationships with learners; with this in mind, the following focuses on the key principles and techniques appropriate within these circumstances in the author's professional experience.

The initial step is to ensure working from community interests; without doing so, activities are susceptible to not being seen as meaningful and potentially not being engaged with. There are key principles of the ten pedagogical approaches to teaching and learning, which promote wellbeing, that are prevalent within museum participatory arts activities. These ten pedagogical approaches form a framework of active approaches that are generic and can be applied to any curriculum area or subject (Excellence Gateway Treasury, 2008). They include experiential learning, cooperative learning and modelling. Experiential learning has its place within museum and participatory arts activities through those experiences learners bring with them and the nature of activities themselves. Through learning by doing, sharing existing experiences and associated memories, learners are actively engaged and taking risks – fostering progression and empowerment. I regularly work with university courses to provide learners with a brief where the museum is the focus; for example, students have been tasked to create a film that can be used as a form of interpretation for a researched target audience of their choice. In this context learners are being faced with a real life creative problem and are facilitated to engage in the pedagogy of relating practice to theory. The process of learning through the arts itself provides a model environment for developing skills to foster wellbeing as it is responsive, involving opinions, ideas, persistence and risk taking (Government Office for Science, 2008).

The key element of cooperative learning already fostered in my work is the development of social and interpersonal skills through bringing together individuals from services into group situations and into the public space of a museum. The focus for me is how I can further embed cooperative learning through creative activities and bring learners together from diverse backgrounds to increase tolerance and understanding. A project in which this was an objective was a partnership with the city's Carers Centre in the form of an exhibition generated by young carers. The exhibition was created by the young carers over a five month project inspired by the theme of home to explore their own homes and lives in the city. Throughout the project they worked with a professional photographer, developing technical skills to take the images showcased in the exhibition. The group spent time

working with museum and carers staff to plan their exhibition and its publicity, to write image labels and share their personal stories. During the project they also shared and reflected on their own experiences and those of older carers. Within the exhibition, visitors could hear some young adult and adult carers speaking about their personal situations and experiences of accessing support as a carer.

The resulting exhibition celebrated the valuable contribution made by the young to their families and city. The nature of this learning opportunity promotes wellbeing by enabling learners to be engaged in a responsive, opinion-based and challenging process. The following verbal report from the Young Carers Service Manager clearly illustrates the positive effects experienced by the young people during their journey through the process:

'They [the young people] have looked at how important home and caring is to them, explored the ways that they cope with the pressures and looked at how they escape from the pressures into the world of play, fantasy and music. All the young people involved have learnt new skills, seen both their self-esteem and self-confidence grow and developed new ways of managing their day-to-day pressures. They have gelled together as a group, making new friends and being able to share with each other their concerns about caring'.

The exhibition supported the fostering of increased understanding within the museum's diverse audience of the valuable contribution the young people make to their families and communities. One visitor comment stated what a moving and beautiful exhibition they found it to be, how it really told the young carers' stories and that the visitor hoped for many more to see the exhibition and understand more about the young people and their lives. Another visitor comment stated what a moving, educative and artistically excellent exhibition it was, and many further comments included thanks to the young carers for sharing so much of themselves with the visitors, some of whom may also have been able to identify with some of the content.

Modelling, as in the case of the above project, through activity, process (working alongside a range of specialist professionals), behaviour and environment, is key in fostering wellbeing in learners. Behaviour modelling within a particular environment or to a particular audience should show fallibility by acknowledging mistakes and then working to learn together; *'teachers have a key modelling role: demonstrating resilience in the face of difficulties'* (National Healthy School Standard, 2004: p. 118).

The following are conventions for achieving wellbeing; conventions which can be seen to run through museum learning opportunities as illustrated by the examples presented. There are specific ways these conventions impact on practice within participatory arts activities in museums and how they can be achieved in this context:

- *Involve learners in setting targets for themselves.* Ensure that museum activities work from community interests through a constant process of open dialogue and consultation to ensure they are relevant and meaningful. Additionally, within individual projects, work should be undertaken collaboratively to shape the process by which to achieve the intended outcomes.
- *Give learners influence upon their progression to support a feeling of belonging.* Museums and arts activities facilitate people to make connections to people and places, to develop emotional resilience and express individuality (Health+Culture, 2012). By facilitating these outcomes and offering progression opportunities within participatory public programmes and volunteering, learners are empowered to have personal influence.

- *Provide opportunities for reflection.* Museums and the arts have the power to stimulate reflection on one's own experiences and reminiscence, which is especially beneficial for older learners – ‘“life review” can help a person come to terms with unresolved conflicts from the past’ (Goulding, 2012: p. 218).
- *Raising expectations.* Recognition of success is crucial to self-esteem, empowerment and motivation. Within museums, in the main, learning is not accredited and recognition needs to be achieved via other means. Within my teaching, this includes participation certificates, visible presence of activities within the professional platform of the organisation and on organisation web and facebook pages.
- *Enable learners to have a voice.* This is a core strand throughout effective museum arts engagement. The learner's voice is pivotal in the inception of activities, during the process and in any physical outputs. By giving learners a voice, motivation can be enhanced as ‘people inspired by the museum are more likely and better equipped to get involved with civic life within their own communities’ (Thompson and Aked, 2011: p. 7).

Conclusion

As has been evidenced, wellbeing is not a subject that can be either taught academically or defined easily but it is a state that has a tremendous impact on the nature of individuals. As the preceding examples demonstrate, museums support learning through a wide range of models and learning styles. They also have an added value in that they can offer opportunities that orthodox learning environments and teaching methods may be unable to provide. Museum learning is based on real life experiences; it is creative, engaging, hands-on and curiosity and learner driven. Most importantly for me as a practitioner, learning is embedded in informal and enjoyable activities.

As educators, how we structure activities and projects has a great impact on learners' experiences and their abilities to deal with change and challenge within our subject context and their wider lives. The greater the opportunities for self-expression and relation to individuals' experiences, the greater the degree of empowerment and psychological benefits fostered. The creative, participative and explorative nature of museum arts activity is well placed to enable this. A key element to promote wellbeing within the museum learning context is to enable individuals to grow within themselves and take their next step, through additional learning or volunteering if they wish to. Activities should contribute to societies' wider goals; they should be subject and context specific whilst simultaneously supporting learners' development of transferable skills to facilitate motivated and empowered citizens.

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